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# Visually impaired students lack books

By ANITA WEIER  
The Capital Times

Wilson Miller is legally blind, but didn't think that would stop him from getting a college education.

His optimism is faltering. He had trouble finding usable textbooks, a problem that, according to state officials, could affect as many as 10,000 students in the University of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Technical College systems



Miller

who are blind, vision impaired or have other reading difficulties.

"I had to drop a couple of classes at MATC last fall to keep a clean record. I passed three other courses, but I couldn't

get usable formats of textbooks for two courses until November. It was too late," Miller said.

When he went to sign up for second semester, a professor had not provided a book list to the bookstore, and Miller gave up.

"I didn't want to go through the hassle again, and I didn't think I should have to," said Miller, 19, who is now working as a line cook at a Taco Bell in Portage, where he lives with his parents.

Miller didn't have this problem in high school.

K-12 students with visual handicaps receive usable versions of textbooks from the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Janesville, which receives electronic versions that publishers must by law provide to a federal repository. The center converts the materials into Braille, large print or other formats and sends them to schools that request them.

College students with vision problems, however, do not have such a program, but a bill being considered by the Legislature would establish requirements for publishers as well as a state repository that would provide alternative materials.

Miller and his parents have high hopes for that legislation.

"Wilson got a 3.5 grade point average in high school, and in the three classes where he did have the materials at Madison Area Technical College, he got A's and B's," said his mother, Margo Miller.

She tried to get appropriate materials from publishers, who told her they did not give permission to individuals to enlarge or alter formats because of fear that texts would go on the black market.

The publishers required that both the student and the college buy the book.

"The institution has to run that book through a scanner and put it into a computer program. Then they use optical character recognition to scan it into the computer. But there are no graphs or pictures, so it still is not a full copy of the book," she said.

Some letters also scan incorrectly, so the college spends time editing what has been scanned

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before it can be changed into audio, large print or Braille format, a time-consuming process, she said.

"The tendency is when they try to print out these textbooks, O's become A's and C's, and numbers become letters and semicolons. That makes it hard to get a better grade," Wilson Miller said.

### Assembly bill

Rep. Donna Seidel, D-Wausau, has authored AB 469,

which would require the UW and technical college systems to establish a repository of electronic and alternative format instructional materials at a location that best meets the needs of students who are visually impaired or have a learning disability that affects the ability to read.

Alternative format is defined as Braille, large print texts, audio recordings, digital texts, digital talking books or any medium or format other than standard print that a disabled student needs.

"I got pretty well acquainted with a number of students in the Wausau area in the disabili-

ties program at North Central Technical College," Seidel said. "Their biggest obstacle was their inability to get the materials they need for their coursework. Most people find it really shocking that if they are able to get them, it's weeks into the semester. And many times, when they get some kind of format, it is illegible to a large degree.

"These people are struggling to compete in class and don't have the material. They pay the book fee but don't get the material they need," she said.

The legislation would require publishers to make written materials needed by visually impaired college students

available to the repository in a digital form that could be converted to formats needed by individual students. There would be no expensive duplication of materials at various institutions, because the repository would have it.

Visually impaired students still would be required to buy the book, however, because of copyright laws. But they could receive the material much sooner than is true at present. The bill requires that a publisher provide an electronic version of the text to the repository within 15 days at no additional cost.

### Funding problems?

But a big caveat in the bill, considering the state's perilous financial condition, is the statement "subject to the availability of funds."

"We know we will need some funding to get this central repository established," Seidel said. "But perhaps we could generate revenue after the repository is established, if other states would pay to use the facility's services."

The Legislative Fiscal Bu-

reau estimated the cost of establishing a repository at \$130,000, followed by annual costs at \$210,000 to cover initial startup, periodic equipment replacement and salaries for three staff people.

"It was clear that the Assembly committee was quite moved by the testimony at the hearing on the bill. We are very hopeful that the chair will schedule it for a vote so we can get a floor vote," Seidel said.

Rep. Steve Nass, R-Whitewater, who chairs the Committee on Colleges and Universities, said the bill has merit, but he wants to pin down a source of funding for a repository before calling a committee vote.

"There is clearly a need for this, but it is not fair to people using these resources to have a false hope that it is going to happen," Nass said.

He also plans to meet with publishers to find out the best way to accomplish providing the materials, and to determine what other states have done in this regard.

Prospects for the bill are not dim, but a vote will not happen soon, he said.

Joe Mielczarek, who has pushed hardest for the legislation, says there is no reason to wait, because publishers can easily put texts in a usable format.

"There is no reason nowadays, with the technology we have, why students can't access their textbooks in a timely manner," said Mielczarek, a counselor for students with disabilities at North Central Technical College in Wausau. He also operates a rehabilitation center for the blind and visually impaired.

Twenty-six other states have laws similar to the proposed legislation, though many are not as strong as the Wisconsin version, according to Mielczarek, who also is hoping for national legislation.

"One of our students had a \$180 accounting book but couldn't use it. The student had to drop the class, then I think was offered \$40 for the book. It puts them behind the eight ball. They can't keep up with the material unless someone reads to them every night. That's not acceptable."

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I am a visually handicapped mother who has a totally Blind son. As a young child I sent him to the Dane County headstart program and since he was the only Blind child they insisted I go with him every day. After one day realized that was not necessary. I stayed active in the program and was the treasurer for four years. Next I enrolled him in the preschool visually impaired class in Madison. He was bored and wanted to go to the school in Janesville where both his parents had gone so that is where he went until he graduated from high school. He was on the swim team, in forensics, in the orchestra and many other activities.

After graduating from WSVH started the problems. He wanted to go to college so enrolled him at UW Platteville. The day we went to visit and talk to the counselors there they said it would be no problem and they would find readers for him etc. By the middle of the first semester he was ready to quit because his books were not accessible and they couldn't find readers for him. The couple they did find most of the time didn't show up or would call and say they didn't have time. The biggest concern was he didn't know what kind of job he would be able to find without some kind of degree. A friend who came over to visit him every week end said he needed a girl in his life and he knew of one he might be interested in so on Thanksgiving vacation brought her over. It was the perfect thing for him. She was to graduate from Edgewood High school in the spring and she also

decided to go to UW Platteville against her father's wishes since he was a professor here at UW Madison and wanted her to go here and get a degree in engineering. For the rest of year she read to him on week ends and vacations so he was able to finish with a good grade point average. He did have to drop a class or two and take five years to graduate and then went on to White Water for his masters in business with the same problem of promising readers and help but didn't get so Theresa again came to the rescue to do all his reading. They are still together and after 26 years together got married last fall.

This Braille bill is very important so that all students no matter what school or grade they are in have the same access to materials as the sighted people.

When I graduated from high school I could not afford to go to college but would have had a chance to go the St. Vincent DePaul orphanage training class in Chicago and work there but the print in their manuals was too small for me to read. I did have a relative read the test for the enrollment to me which was an all day test and I had a 99 on it but they wouldn't take me because of my low vision. They also thought I wouldn't be able to read thermometers, and ounces on the baby bottles. I told them I could use a magnifying glass but it was still no. If I could have had the books enlarged I could have done it.

*Tally Zenchenko*



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**DONNA SEIDEL**  
**STATE REPRESENTATIVE**  
**85TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT**

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**Testimony of Rep. Donna Seidel**  
**Senate Bill 238**  
**Senate Committee on Agriculture and Higher Education**  
**October 17, 2007**

Chairperson Vinehout and committee members, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of SB 238 which will make written materials accessible to students with disabilities enrolled in the UW System and our state's Technical College System. This bill is a reintroduction of legislation from last session and this year Senator Roessler has introduced a Senate companion bill. I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for her work on behalf of this legislation.

The purpose of SB 238 is to ensure that any student in our Technical College System or UW System will have timely access to all written materials needed to be successful in their educational pursuits. For example, this means that for the blind and those with other physical or learning disabilities, materials will be available for them in formats such as Braille, large print or audio. It's not just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing to do.

SB 238 requires publishers to make all written materials available in an electronic format that can be converted to meet the specific needs of the students. By giving equal access to written materials, students will be more successful, the cost of providing accommodations to students with disabilities will decline, our workforce will be expanded and our state's economy will be strengthened.

This bill provides the resources needed to establish a cooperative program between both the UW System and the Technical College System, and establishes a state repository in order to produce materials more efficiently. The repository would collect instructional materials from the publishers and produce the alternative formats for students enrolled at institutions of higher education across the state. Creating a successful repository could also allow Wisconsin to become a leader in this practice and eventually produce revenue if other states choose to use the resources that are produced.

SB 238 will go a long way toward ensuring that students have every opportunity for success. You will hear from teachers and providers who are responsible for translating written text, as well as students and individuals who will directly benefit from this process. So, I will close and unless there are questions from the committee, will give others here the opportunity to talk with you.

Thank you for your attention to this important legislation.